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ABSTRACT

Noting that the development of effective intervention programs and instructional strategies for the struggling or underachieving reader continues to be a topic of concern, this Digest first reviews the current status of reading performance, based on the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress. It then reports on the importance of early reading instruction and presents a summary of the components of successful intervention programs. The Digest concludes by summarizing the types of instructional activities present in successful intervention programs. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication EDO-CS-99-02

Helping the Underachiever in Reading

by Diana J. Quatroche

Learning to read is a complex process. Most children learn to read and continue to grow in their mastery of this process. However, there continues to be a group of children for whom learning to read is a struggle. This group that continues to struggle presents a challenge to our schools. Thus the development of effective intervention programs and instructional strategies for the struggling reader, or the underachiever in reading, continues to be a topic of concern. This digest will first review the current status of reading performance, then report on the importance of early reading instruction. A summary of the components of successful intervention programs will be presented and the paper will conclude by summarizing the types of instructional activities present in successful intervention programs.

The Current Status of Reading Performance

According to the results of the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell & Mazzeo, 1999), students continue to make improvements in their acquisition of reading skills, however this progress is only being made at the basic level of reading. The NAEP reading report card, which summarizes reading achievement results for grades 4, 8 and 12, reports results at three reading levels: basic, proficient, and advanced. Achievement at a basic reading level is partial mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed at each grade level, achievement at a proficient level describes solid academic performance and competence when presented with challenging material, and achievement at an advanced level indicates superior performance. Although the average reading scores for all grade levels increased, the percentages of 4th, 8th and 12th graders who performed at or above the proficient level were 31, 33, and 40 percent and the percentages who performed at the highest level were 7, 3, and 6 percent, respectively. In addition, at grade 4 there were no significant changes since the 1994 and 1992 assessments in the percentages of students attaining any of the reading achievement levels. These results demonstrate cause for concern as only one third or less of the students demonstrated an ability to read above the basic level. A particularly instructive finding of this study is that 12th grade students who had higher average reading achievement reported coming from homes where there was a variety of literacy materials available; they read for fun on their own time; they discussed their studies; and they watched less than the average amount of television. Furthermore, these students read each day in school, were asked by their teachers to explain or support their understanding of what they were reading, and were asked to explain their interpretations of what they had read.

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The Importance of Initial Reading Instruction

There is now increased interest in preventing reading problems before they develop, and in engaging young children in activities that will enable them to meet success as readers at the early grade levels. According to a report of the National Research Council, the type of instruction children receive in the classroom is very important in the prevention of reading difficulties (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It would seem that effective instruction is a key component of successful acquisition of reading competency and in helping to prevent underachievement in reading. The Council makes several recommendations designed to foster instruction that will prevent reading difficulties before they start and that will allow all children to succeed. The report suggests that initial instruction:

- Focus on using reading to gain meaning from print
- Develop an understanding of the structure of spoken words
- Help children understand the nature of the orthographic system
- Provide practice of regular spelling-sound relationships
- Provide many opportunities for reading and writing

To further ensure success in reading beyond the initial level, children need many opportunities to develop an understanding of how sounds are represented in print, to develop fluency through practice reading texts, to develop concepts and vocabulary, and to develop strategies for monitoring their comprehension.

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Successful Intervention Programs

Reviews of effective intervention programs have targeted some common characteristics that make these programs successful (Snow et al., 1998; Pikulski, 1994; Pinnell, 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). One on one and small group tutoring tend to be most effective for children who are struggling with reading, as these provide the most individualized attention and extra instructional time these readers need. The instruction for struggling readers needs to be congruent with the regular classroom instruction so that the two programs are coordinated. Children who are struggling to learn to read need excellent instruction provided by highly skilled personnel. This includes the instruction provided in the regular reading program and the intervention program. These components would be essential in any program to help underachievers in reading.

Instruction for Underachievers in Reading

Successful interventions, which have targeted both older and younger underachievers in reading, have included the following effective instructional practices:

1. Letter-sound relationships and word identification strategies should be taught explicitly. Teach phonological awareness, letters, words and word patterns. These skills are essential for success as a reader (Grossen, 1997).

2. Provide repeated exposures to words to encourage mastery. Present words in small practice sets to provide scaffolding for struggling readers (Juel, 1996; McCormick, 1994).

3. Explicitly teach strategies for understanding text and monitoring comprehension. Some strategies to teach include K-W-L, self-questioning, visual imagery, ReQuest, retelling, and Question-Answer relationships. Provide instruction that will help struggling readers transfer these strategies to other texts (Dole, 1996; Sorrell, 1996).

4. Provide multiple opportunities for repeated reading of connected texts to develop fluency. Methods of encouraging repeated reading include paired reading, modeling, direct instruction, choral reading, neurological impress, and providing easy reading materials. Repeated reading also helps to increase the word recognition rate and accuracy of the reader (McCormick, 1994; Reutzel, 1994; Dowhower, 1994).

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